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F.B.I. Learns Chilean Plot to Kill Letelier in '76 Involved Nerve Gas

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 12 — The Federal Bureau of Investigation has been informed that the Chilean secret police manufactured a supply of nerve gas and shipped it to the United States for possible use in the 1976 assassination of Orlando Letelier, a former Chilean ambassador.

The nerve gas, which was bottled in a Chanel No. 5 perfume atomizer and transported to the United States on a Chilean airliner, was not used in the assassination and was returned to Chile, according to an account contained in a confidential memorandum from William H. Webster, Director of the F.B.I.

The information was obtained from Michael Vernon Townley, the Chilean agent who admitted killing Mr. Letelier, a leading opponent of the military junta headed by Gen. Augusto Pinochet. The former ambassador died in an explosion in his car on Washington's Embassy Row in September 1978.

The existence of the nerve gas, which Chile is said to have produced for use if hostilities arose with Argentina and Peru, came to light in research by two Americans writing a book about the Letelier case. The two, Eugene M. Propper, former chief United States prosecutor in the Letelier case, and Taylor Branch, a writer, shared details with the F.B.I., which in turn confirmed substantial portions of the account in an interview with Mr. Townley.

Centerpiece of 'Project Andrea'

According to the account, the nerve gas was the centerpiece of "Project Andrea," a secret undertaking of the Chilean secret police, then known as the National Intelligence Directorate. The account said the gas was manufactured by

Mr. Townley and stored in a laboratory in his home in Santiago.

Mr. Townley, an American-born Chilean, was convicted in May 1979 of conspiring to murder a foreign official and is serving a sentence of 40 months to 10 years in a Federal penitentiary.

Lawrence Barcella Jr., an Assistant United States Attorney who prosecuted the case, said in an interview tonight that the report of nerve gas was "indicative of how far D.I.N.A. and the Chilean junta were willing to go to eliminate a political opponent."

The Webster memorandum indicated that the F.B.I. had made no recommendations or had reached any conclusions in light of the disclosures.

Anti-Castro Leaders Aware

According to the memo, Mr. Townley told the F.B.I. that Guillermo Novo Sampol and Virgilio Pablo Paz Romero, leaders of the anti-Castro Cuban Nationalist Movement, had been aware that he possessed the nerve gas. He added that they requested a supply of it but that he refused to provide it because he considered them unstable.

Mr. Novo, in a reversal of a jury trial two years ago, was acquitted last spring of murder and conspiracy charges in the Letelier case, but he was reconvicted of two counts of lying to a grand jury and is serving a sentence in a federal prison. Mr. Paz is still at large.

According to the report provided to the F.B.I., Mr. Townley used a microwave oven and gas cylinders to produce a nerve gas known as "sarin." When exposed to air, sarin produces droplets that enter the body through the skin or lungs, affecting the respiratory muscles.